

STEADY AS SHE GOES: THE GENDERED
FRONTIER OF NEVILLS EXPEDITION,
1936-49

by

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ABSTRACT

Between 1936 and 1949, Norm Nevills operated a river running company called Nevills Expedition in Mexican Hat, Utah. Norm and his wife, Doris, guided multiple river trips down the San Juan and Colorado rivers each summer. From all over the United States, men and women would travel to Mexican Hat to experience the rivers of southern Utah under Norm's careful ministrations. This thesis explores the gendered implications of Norm's trips and the extraordinary (and sometimes ordinary) women who participated in them. I argue that the nuanced interaction between these women, Norm, and traditional gender roles demonstrates the complexity and fluidity of gender as a social construct.

Through a close reading of the Doris D. and Norman Nevills papers at the University of Utah's Marriott library, I show that Norm and Doris' river trips offered their passengers a unique way to explore what being a man or woman meant in contemporary society. The different characters that emerge from this reading highlight important gendered expectations that river running allowed them to challenge or accept.

To all the ladies who came before me, and showed me how to boldly go, and encouraged me to do whatever I want.

Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.

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CHAPTER 1

RIVERS, THE WEST, AND AMERICA IN THE 1930s AND 1940s

“The San Juan [R]iver impressed me greatly. I’ll never forget the “Goosenecks,” an amazing thing. People wonder why I just live from one Western trip to the next. Everything is so big and timeless there. It makes so many worries and things here seem so petty.”

■ *Elzada Clover, 1938*

Between 1936 and 1949, Norm Nevills (Figure 1.1) operated a river running company called Nevills Expedition in Mexican Hat, Utah. He and his family lived on a parcel of land nestled in a canyon along the San Juan River. Until they died in a plane crash in 1949, Norm and his wife, Doris, guided multiple river trips down the San Juan and Colorado rivers each summer. From all over the United States, men and women would travel to Mexican Hat to experience



Figure 1.1. Norm Nevills. (Photo courtesy of Special Collections Department, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah).

the rivers of southern Utah under Norm's careful ministrations.

Norm Nevills was a charismatic and arrogant man, whose charm and ruggedness worked to convince his passengers of both genders that he was an authority beyond reproach in concerns of river running and recreation. Norm embodied and supported many gendered expectations of his time: he was self-reliant, intense, brawny, and authoritative. While these expectations may *seem* specific to the craft of river running, Norm himself insisted that his passengers and crew adapt to their environment regardless of their gender, socio-economic background, or age. Norm wielded this interpretation of masculinity to turn his river runs into small-scale societal structures, in which he had all the power and control, and the passengers and other boatmen were subservient to him. This aspect of Norm's character explains, in part, why Norm bucked certain gendered expectations – like not allowing women to run rivers – and enforced others – like relegating women to certain “domestic” chores while they were on the river. Men and women and the expectations of their gender in larger society were less important to Norm; what mattered to him was that his passengers and staff perceived him as masculine, and in control at all times.

Even though most experienced rafters of this time considered the desert climate and rushing water of Western rivers too dangerous or too challenging for women, Norm actively recruited many women to accompany him on these trips throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Norm allowed, and in some cases took great care to include, women on his voyages. Norm's requirements for his passengers had more to do with their temperament and attitude than they did with their

adherence to traditional standards of gender or even physical ability. What Norm looked for in a fellow “River Rat” was someone who worked hard, did not complain, and was agreeable even in the face of exhaustion and exertion.¹

Norm’s wife, Doris, was an experienced river running partner. Despite gendered standards that limited women’s participation in outdoor recreation, sports, and science, many women eagerly took on the challenges of river running, and Norm and Doris offered a unique opportunity for some women to trespass those gendered standards. Though these women did not necessarily think of themselves as social oddities (indeed, they expended a great deal of effort to maintain 1930s and 1940s standards of femininity and womanhood through their appearance and behavior), the river afforded them opportunities to bend social expectations, and to explore those expectations in order to determine how they might not adhere to them. In some cases, the river changed how they felt they could interact with the world based on their sex. It freed them from some behaviors observed in polite society, and allowed them to explore the kind of adventure and liberation that American and western European men had sought in the wilderness for decades.

In some cases, the women who traveled with Norm had come of age in a world that invited their participation in alpine and climbing clubs. These kinds of communities invited the involvement of men and women both, and their heterosocial nature might have made some women feel more comfortable in what was otherwise considered a “man’s world.” Seeking social participation and

¹ This becomes exceedingly evident in Norm’s contact with Dr. Elzada Clover, which I discuss later in this paper.

group efforts, these women bravely ventured into the realm of river running, a sport that – even when these women were beginning to raft – was considered too challenging and too strenuous for women.

Using the correspondence and papers of the Nevills collection at the University of Utah, this thesis will explore how Norm's particular brand of river running adventures allowed women to find cracks in the gendered standards and expectations of their time. Whether through science, art, or recreation, this collection of women emerged on the other side of their experience with different ideas about their gendered identity. At the same time, this thesis will discuss how Norm's masculinity both enforced a power structure that allowed for greater variation from standard gender roles, and maintained a strict hierarchy in which Norm was consistently at the top. Under Norm's care, through the remote landscapes of winding Utah rivers, many women found inspiration for their work, or they found that strict adherence to ideas about what society viewed as "lady-like" was not necessary. Sometimes they discovered that there were parts of standardized femininity that they wanted to retain – a practice that Norm worked to reinforce and to impress upon them; they tried to keep their hair in order, and they brought dressing gowns with them on their river trips, despite limited storage space. By examining the letters, notes, and journals that Norm and his passengers kept and shared, this thesis will identify what gendered standards influenced their lives, and further examine how their thinking about those standards changed or were upheld through the transformative experience of river running.

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The women of the Nevills expeditions demonstrated awareness and an interest in their adventures as women. They reflected on the rugged nature of their expeditions in ways that highlight their strengths and weaknesses as females. Men and women participate in outdoor experiences in similar and different capacities. While a masculine approach to the challenges wilderness poses might be to focus on pushing boundaries, and learn new skills, women might approach their experiences in the wilderness with a sense of community and cooperation.

Doris Nevills pointed out that one could not simply go out on the river on their own; they must have acted as part of a functioning team in order to survive. However, Norm Nevills defied this mantra by personifying the classic archetypal hero of the Western novel, an archetype that revolves around the concept of man's *individual* and *intimate* relationship with nature and wilderness.

If nature's wildness and hardness test his strength and will and intelligence, they also give him solace and refreshment. Perhaps more than anything nature gives the hero a sense of **himself**. For he is competent in this setting. He knows his horse will leave him to water, knows how to build a fire and where to camp. He can take care of himself. [emphasis added]²

According to Jane Tompkins, this Western hero is intrinsically individualistic and solitary, and while that clashes with the pragmatic reality of river running that Doris and Norm lived with, the *image* Norm maintained of himself was that of a rugged adventurer. Norm clearly mirrored this archetype, and throughout his correspondence, it is evident that his relationship with "the river" was one of the

² Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything* (Oxford: Oxford UP) 1992, 81.

most consistent and defining in his life. As Norm lived and made his living on the river, this relationship based on constancy is to be expected. All of the women in this study, excepting Doris, went through a dramatic but relatively short-lived affair with the wilderness. The temporary nature of their journey shaped their experience and makes it inherently different from Norm's.

Scholars of the social effects of outdoor recreation and sport, Clayne Jensen and Steven Guthrie argue that the social and communal aspects of such adventures are often more important for women than they are for men.³ Joseph Taylor argues that alpine and climbing clubs contributed to this sense of community. Because most of these clubs allowed women to participate even from the beginning, the heterosocial communities they provided encouraged and embraced women's participation. Men and women needed to work together to achieve collective goals, and in these clubs, members arranged an array of social activities that allowed them to participate in the same physical work, the same outdoor experiences, regardless of gender.

Many of the women who ran the river with Nevills Expedition, especially those involved in the 1938 and 1940 scientific expeditions, had a long background of climbing, hiking, and camping in these kinds of clubs. Doris Nevills accompanied her husband on the 1940 expedition, and reflected this sense of community and collective effort before embarking on the journey. Her journals, published in a local newspaper, reported,

A man asks me if I think I'll be able to finish the whole trip. I answer somewhat impatiently, 'If I didn't intend to finish I wouldn't be starting.' I

³ Clayne R. Jensen, Steven Guthrie, *Outdoor Recreation in America* (Champaign, IL : Human Kinetics) 1995, 66.

dislike quitters. I have no illusions as to the trip. It'll be wonderful but hard work and will take plenty of teamwork. The river is no place for an individualist who refuses to cooperate.⁴

These women often *did* think of their experiences in gendered terms. They had expectations of what was “womanly” or appropriate and realized that in some cases, their experiences on the river were exceptional or crossed otherwise gendered lines. They were aware that as women, the expectations of their gender sometimes limited their skill or experience. While many had climbing and hiking experience, only some knew how to swim. In their letters, these women, like Doris Nevills (Figure 1.2), reflect the period from which they are writing while simultaneously rubbing up against the standards set for them.

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Figure 1.2. Doris (Norm's wife), Joan (their older daughter), and "Moe" (Norm's mother) Nevills, 1937. (Photo courtesy of Northern Arizona University, Cline Library, Colorado Plateau Archives).

⁴ "Woman Conquerer of the Colorado," published in The Daily Sentinel, Grand Junction, Colorado, June 15-July 6, 1941. Folder 9, Box 28, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

The women who went with Norm on his river expeditions and leisure trips represent a diverse mixture of ages, backgrounds, educations, and experiences, though they were all white. They sought scientific data, artistic inspiration, youthful adventure, and opportunities to connect with the extreme climates and the spectacular geography of the West. What they had in common were a healthy sense of adventure, a desire to explore new and exciting territory, and a vitality that they carried with them as they floated downriver.

While they responded to the river in similar ways, the women in this study represent different categories of motivation for beginning their voyages. Drawn to the landscape of the American West, some artistic souls find in its rugged and extreme geography inspiration for their creativity. Norm kept company with several women drawn to his brand of outdoor adventure in the wilderness of the West in order to advance their careers and their lives as artists. Women produced countless songs, watercolors, photographs, and sculptures inspired by their river running experiences. Though this inspiration cannot be separated from the influence of the landscape of the American West, river running certainly provided passengers with a unique perspective. Traditionally, such a vantage would only be available for men, but with Norm's help and at his invitation, several women who had embarked on artistic journeys continued to draw inspiration from the opportunity he provided long after they left the river.

Dr. Elzada Clover and Lois Jotter dedicated their careers to science and to scholarly research. Norm sought out their assistance in the scientific surveys he conducted of the river, beginning in 1938. Even while women emerged as

professionals in physical sciences and academia during the 1930s and 1940s, it remained exceptional for a woman to dedicate her life to scientific inquiry. As the scientific world divided itself into “hard” and “soft” sciences, each division emerged with specific expectations of gender from its participants. At the same time, American women made headway at women’s universities and colleges, moving into academics and newly specialized branches of science like biology, geography, botany, and geology.⁵ Even given the limited number of dedicated women scientists, and the opposition those women faced from mostly male faculties and labs, Norm attracted several women scientists to accompany him and his teams of researchers. These women collected data and conducted their own research, while subject to Norm’s particular expectations that they would help cook and keep camp. Even though Norm bent the “rules” by allowing women to participate in his river running ventures at all, he still maintained certain expectations of his female passengers and those women who accompanied him in scientific and professional capacity.

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At the same time that women made inroads into science and academics, other worlds of sport and recreation opened to women. Some of these women sought adventure and an opportunity to participate in the world of outdoor recreation when they contacted Norm. Many women by the 1930s had experience with hiking, climbing, and mountaineering. American alpine and mountaineering clubs had long included women among their ranks, and provided

⁵ Julie Des Jardins, *The Madame Curie Complex: The Hidden History of Women in Science* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York) 2010.

young Americans opportunities for socializing as well as to explore their outdoor surroundings. Mountain climbing, hiking, and other outdoor activities became social experiences through which young men and women formulated their identities and their relationships to the environment. Though Joseph Taylor argues repeatedly that there is no essentially “masculine” or “feminine” way in which these young people interacted with the natural world, men and women participated with different aims. Some women removed themselves from the social setting of alpine clubs to argue later in their lives that if women want to lead climbs, they must climb only with other women. Some women used their outdoor triumphs as evidence in the argument for women’s suffrage. Decades of environmental conquering resulted in higher and higher climbs, fewer safety precautions, better equipment, and a mentality that reinforced the solitary nature of climbing and mountaineering. This move into isolation and individual connection with nature did not require the cooperation or endorsement of male counterparts in order to allow women to participate in the same kinds of experiences. Even though the blockade for women’s participation in these activities was lower from the start, they made more room for women simply because of their more private nature.⁶

Nevills Expedition represents a commercialization of outdoor recreation, and a change in the standards for entry into this world of outdoor recreation. Norm could have denied passage to anyone he wanted – indeed, other river running companies did not allow women to participate – and yet he intentionally

⁶ Joseph E. Taylor III, *Pilgrims of the Vertical: Yosemite Rock Climbers and Nature at Risk* (Boston: Harvard University Press) 2010.

invited and encouraged women to patronize his business. Freed, in part, from an ideology that defined river running as masculine, the women who became customers of Nevills Expedition explored what it meant to seek adventure in the wilderness, while bumping up against their own (and, in some cases, Norm's) ideas about how these new experiences fit with their sense of femininity.

Scholars often associate excursions and adventures into the wild geographies of the West with triumphs of masculinity. Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis," perhaps the most prevalent and abiding model for explaining the progress of American society and the settling of the West, is dependent on the premise that the white men who traveled west into unforgiving wilderness then conquered it.⁷ The West, so commonly viewed as wild or untamed, has long been part of the story of white, American masculinity. Cowboys, gunslingers, farmers, miners, renegades, ranchers, and entrepreneurs, all masculine tropes of the American West, portray the ruggedness and virility of men, those who went into the "unknown" expanse of the West and emerged victorious. Katherine Morrissey, in her essay *Engendering the West*, argues, "Many of the activities celebrated as central to the western experience - conquering a 'virgin' land, subduing Indians, building railroads, ranching, farming, logging, establishing governments - are those perceived as 'men's work.' Imbued with these masculine images, the ideology of the West celebrates a particular, and gendered, form of American identity."⁸ When women appear at all in the mythology of Western

⁷ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," American Historical Association. Chicago World's Fair. Chicago, 12 July 1893.

⁸ Katherine G. Morrissey, "Engendering the West," in *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co.) 1992, 133.

culture, they serve as a sort of counterpart to these constructions of masculinity. Popular culture and outdated scholarship of the West limits the options for women in settling and interacting with the region to barmaid, prostitute, school marm, or sweet and simple homesteading wife and mother. The stories of frontier living tend to divide men and women very strictly along sexual lines which limit the interpretations and the demonstrations of their gender. These “natural” proclivities and sex roles serve to define the American frontier family as one in which the women are housewives and child-bearers, and men are protectors and providers.

Norm’s own story does not exist independent from this cultural mythology. He offered his patrons a chance at a rare and thrilling look at parts of the United States that were not accessible to the traditional bastions of American tourism. Norm’s world still made room for “firsts” as explorers mapped and documented their way through the rivers and the canyons of southeastern Utah. As evidenced by the 41 boxes of correspondence and other primary source material in the Norm and Doris Nevills Collection in the Manuscripts department of the Marriott Library Special Collections, for the most part, the explorers and those looking to put their “name on the map” were white men drawn to the remote and “unknown” wilderness that the landscape offered. Norm’s 1938 and 1940 expeditions testify to the notion that he and his company still considered themselves intrepid explorers, encroaching into the domain of the wilderness, and attempting to document her wildness. These proving grounds of manly prowess served to help

Norm and his passengers to become direct participants in the white mission to conquer and to tame these last remaining “natural” spaces.

Norm insisted that these ventures were safe, and he took great pride in his successful boating record. At the same time, Norm was a shrewd businessperson who understood that by emphasizing the remoteness and the danger of these kinds of voyages, he could attract more personnel. Norm consistently and effectively utilized the kind of romantic mythology surrounding the “danger” and “savagery” of the American West championed by earlier cultural figureheads like Theodore Roosevelt to advertise his business.⁹ Insecurities and anxiety surrounding the status of new industrialization inspired this marriage of masculinity and nature in turn-of-the-century America. Proponents of this new masculinity touted outdoor recreation, as well as the violent vestiges of frontier life as the restorative force that would rejuvenate and invigorate American men and boys.¹⁰ Norm agreed, wholeheartedly, that outdoor experiences dependent on physical labor and determination of spirit offered his patrons a sort of healthy respite from their city lives.

It's not only the incomparable scenery that we'll see, or the fact that we'll actually be contributing a lot to the knowledge of this fertile area, but the great thrill and adventure, plus the pleasure of good fellowship in camp life, make this a wonderfull [sic] trip. And it's proven that these trips with my food system guarantee anyone, no matter what his or her condition may be at the start – of landing at the point of termination in the best physical condition ever attained. The healthy life, plus good food, lots of sleep and exercise, with mental accompaniment of constant satisfaction –

⁹ An adequate discussion regarding Theodore Roosevelt and masculinity and the Western frontier should include a great deal of analysis and consideration regarding the role of race and whiteness. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to give this particular facet of this argument its due, and therefore, I am omitting large swaths of the research regarding the interplay between Roosevelt, race, and his perception of the West in favor of the research focused on gender.

¹⁰ Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 1995.

just does something to you.¹¹

Though the story of the American West does not conventionally make room for women seeking adventure, science, or independence, Norm was adamant about including women on his voyages for whatever purpose they desired. This sentiment is mirrored in Norm's early correspondence with Harry Aleson, when, in a discussion of advertising river running as a business, Harry wrote to Norm:

I'll submit a suggested form for an ad to you for your approval or rejection. It will deal only with your 1942 Colorado River Expedition, calling attention to its uniqueness to all world-travelers, land or water; all explorers into the little-known; professors of science; doctors of law and medicine; and all men and women whose great urge to explore will never be satisfied...

White, American women in the 1930s and 1940s were subject to great fluctuations in cultural standards of gender. This is especially true when considering working women and their relationship to labor. During the Great Depression, a great backlash against the feminism of the 1920s took place as men found themselves out of work, and the federal government stepped in to make assurances to Americans that they would be able to support themselves. As long as men were out of work, the United States government tried to limit the spheres in which women could earn wages outside the home. The message was clear: it was a woman's responsibility to keep her family together and healthy, but only so far as it did not interfere with a man's ability to support the family financially. Of course, many women still worked outside the home during this period, despite the increase in regulations.

¹¹ Letter from Norm Nevills to Harry Aleson, November 28, 1939. Folder 7, Box 4, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

As the Great Depression ended, and the United States prepared for entrance into World War II, the country required something entirely different from its women. In a complete reversal from the Great Depression, the federal government encouraged and demanded that women do their patriotic duty and leave their homes to get a job. As part of the “war effort” of the middle-class, white women joined the workforce in droves, sometimes for the first time, to support America’s fighting men.¹² Women joined the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps and offered their services as nurses or other support staff. These women donned uniforms, and learned appropriate rules and regulations for their stations. Even as women in the 1940s entered into masculine social spheres where they had never before been welcome, when the war ended, those women were expected to return home. It became a societal expectation of the postwar United States that middle-class, white American women would ideally spend their time tending homes and raising children. While millions of women returned home to their new patriotic duty – buying washing machines and television sets, raising children, and throwing house parties – many did not. The sense that doors to some men’s spheres of influence where women had not previously been welcome had been flung open abided, and for some American women, there was no going back. For some women, physical ability and outdoor recreation had become “safe” spheres of influence and cultural participation. Understandably, as World War II wound down and ideas about respectable womanhood and athleticism became more limited, some women found that those restraints were too cumbersome to bear. This limited interpretation of women’s physical

¹² It should be noted that women have always worked – especially women of color or of the lower classes.

expression is evident in Norm's clientele of American women searching for adventure in ways that still allowed them to retain their sexual respectability.

Without exception, the women discussed in this study were white. They came mostly from the middle or upper-middle class. They prove capable, smart, and daring, and the feelings of exuberance and excitement they express at their accomplishments along the river resonate soundly with the records of women who joined the armed forces or took on nontraditional work in the 1940s. Running the river left them feeling accomplished and fulfilled, independent and empowered.¹³

¹³ Susan Ware, *Modern American Women: A Documentary History* (New York: McGraw-Hill) 1997.

CHAPTER 2

FOR SCIENCE

Norm ran many scientific expeditions, soliciting scholars to come along who could record and collect plant, animal, and rock specimens, map the course of the river, or chart precipitation. A pioneer of sorts, Norm took care to include women on these surveys. The earliest and perhaps most notable of these trips took place in 1938. Norm secured the services of Dr. Elzada Clover and Lois Jotter from the University of Michigan to study the plant life of the Grand Canyon. Clover, a botanist, solicited the involvement of another woman scientist at Norm's behest. In a letter from January of 1938 while organizing the trip, Clover responded to Norm's request, "I shall try to get a woman to make the trip, but will be very careful in the selection, because one not accustomed to hardships or to all kinds of camping out can be very cantankerous on a long journey."¹⁴

Hoping to earn a reputation for "firsts," Norm wanted the women botanists to accompany him from Green River, Utah to Lake Mead, conducting scientific surveys of the river as they went. Their voyage lasted a grueling 43 days and spanned 666 miles of river. Clover and Jotter, one of Clover's graduate students, in trying to find funding from their University, wanted to maintain their right to the

¹⁴ Letter from Elzada Clover to Norm Nevills, January 1938. Folder 23, Box 6, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

“first botanical study” of the Grand Canyon claim. In February of 1938, Clover learned that a man from Oregon, a geologist, had undertaken a similar trip down the Grand Canyon. The man’s impression of the Canyon left Clover worried about her research funding from the University, “That Oregon man made the bright statement that women had their place but it was not on the Colorado. I pray that the committee on research grants does not read the Saturday Evening Post.”¹⁵

Though Clover eventually secured her grant for the trip, she did so against great resistance from some faculty at the University of Michigan. Those opposed to her travels expressed their concern in largely gendered terms. “I haven’t heard yet but do know that some of the older men on this research committee think it is a pretty wild thing for a woman to do. I haven’t told them that I’m going anyway. The botany people are all for it though... Women have a dickens of a time here anyway. The faculty is nearly 100% men and the student body is largely men.”¹⁶ Dr. Clover’s experience in her academic department was not at all exceptional. Even though women had made steady and significant inroads into scientific communities by the time Dr. Clover wrote her letter to Norm, they did so in small numbers and their male counterparts consistently outnumbered them, when universities and colleges allowed them to join their faculties at all.¹⁷

The extensive river trip represented months of time and hundreds of miles of possibilities for study. The limitations of the boats allowed Clover and Jotter to

¹⁵ Letter from Elzada Clover to Norm Nevills, February 1938. Folder 23, Box 6, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Londa Schiebinger, *The History and Philosophy of Women in Science: A Review Essay* (*Signs*, Vol. 12, No. 2, Reconstructing the Academy). Winter, 1987, 315-316.

bring only 35 pounds of personal belongings on the voyage. They would have to make special accommodations for the scientific equipment they wished to bring with them. They would also have to prepare themselves for the extreme climates of the Utah desert, and the demanding nature of river running. Until the 1938 Expedition, traditional thinking about river trips of this nature said that they were too strenuous for women and therefore belonged squarely within the realm of masculine adventure.¹⁸ Norm often bucked these restrictive standards and welcomed the presence of women on his trips. He and his wife, Doris (Drown) Nevills, honeymooned on a boat down the San Juan in 1933. Norm remarked, “Women make the best men,” because he found that they did not complain, they worked hard, and they were good company.

Not completely without his loyalties to traditional American gender roles, Norm asked the women scientists of his expeditions to prepare meals. In February of 1938, responding to Norm’s request that she and Jotter be responsible for the cooking during the Expedition (Figure 2.1), Elzada wrote, “I



Figure 2.1. The 1938 Grand Canyon Expedition. (Photo courtesy of Special Collections Department, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah).

¹⁸ Robert H. Webb, et al., *Cataract Canyon: A Human and Environmental History of the Rivers in Canyonlands* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press) 2004, 32.

shall be glad to see the menu in order to get into the spirit of the thing. Miss Jotter is also very well experienced in camp cooking and I think that between us we can handle the kitchen end of the trip and relieve you men, since you will have so many other things to attend to.”¹⁹ Even though the presence of Dr. Clover made the expedition a “first,” to Norm the importance of her domestic role as a woman surpassed that of her botanical research in this respect. Norm did not hesitate to ask her to perform in the “womanly” capacity of preparing meals for the men of the trip, and it does not appear that such a request offended Clover. She did not object to his asking, and instead embraced the opportunity to serve her cohort in this way. Even while Dr. Clover and Ms. Jotter crossed gendered boundaries in the eyes of their professional peers, they happily maintained similar boundaries in terms of cooking and “house” work along the river.

The 1938 trip was strenuous and difficult, and Norm and his “crew” encountered a few mishaps along the way. Dr. Clover’s own responses to some of the challenges of the river disappointed her. “This last run was nearly too much for me. I got a terrible tummy ache. Became nauseated and at last when I saw that both boys were safe, I crawled under a bush and cried like a baby. That’s the stuff sissies are made of.”²⁰ Norm, however, wrote glowing reviews about Dr. Clover’s performance on the river. About two weeks into their excursion, the group began to tire of one another, everyone except Norm and

¹⁹ Letter from Elzada Clover to Norm Nevills, February 1938. Folder 23, Box 6, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

²⁰ Elzada Clover’s journal, Folder 2, Box 29, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

Clover were sick from drinking river water (or, if you were to ask Norm, from hard work, heat, and “nervous strain”), and they were still recovering from a harrowing experience through one rapid wherein the group nearly lost one of their three boats. A contentious attitude spread through the company, leaving Norm and Clover in a sort of strange partnership separate from the rest of the group. Norm seemed to think that everyone else was “whispering amongst themselves and trying to work up a good excuse to quit at Lee’s Ferry,”²¹ while he and Elzada performed the brunt of the hard labor. Norm thought that Lois Jotter slept too much and Gene Culter did not follow his instructions. Norm declared that he thought, “Elzada is the best man in the bunch” and continued to write disparagingly about the rest of his company.

By referring to Dr. Clover as the “best man in the bunch,” Norm compliments Elzada while simultaneously belittling the men in the group. A comment like this tells us little about Dr. Clover other than the fact that she was both “aligned” with Norm’s interests at the time and had successfully ingratiated herself to him. The true subject of this comment is not Elzada, but the men in the company who Norm found lacking. Their lack of “manly” (or “river-rat”) characteristics had frustrated Norm to the point that he called their masculinity into question. Dr. Clover fit perfectly into the power structure that Norm envisioned for the trip, but the men, with their propensity for illness, showed a weakness that Norm could not abide. Norm’s conception of masculinity, then, is not so much about exhibiting traditionally masculine characteristics, but instead is focused on fitting into a larger power structure that supports Norm. Women were

²¹ Norm Nevills’ journal, July 6, 1938.

obviously included in this power structure as well, and while Norm frequently challenged many gender roles, sometimes reinforcing specific aspects of femininity allowed him the control over his expeditions that he sought.

After reading about the 1938 expedition including Dr. Clover and Lois Jotter, Mildred Baker contacted Norm to seek a spot on the 1940 Grand Canyon expedition. The trip was again to be scientific in nature, and Baker, who described her hobbies as, "Nature study in practically all branches. Most proficient in botany. An amateur ornithologist, but not very familiar with western birds except readily-identified species,"²² sent Norm a long letter describing her professional background, interests, outdoors experience, and appearance. At 39 years of age, Baker could not swim. She worked for the Natural History Museum in Buffalo, New York, and boasted a lifetime's worth of camping and pack trips across the United States and Canada.

Norm agreed to take Baker along on the 1940 Colorado Expedition. This particular journey represented hundreds of miles of river for exploration and study. It included passage through Glen Canyon and Flaming Gorge, both of which became part of an effort to control the water systems of Utah in the 1950s and 1960s, which resulted in huge dams in both areas. Norm responded to her letter,

Was very pleased to hear from you and learn of your positive interest in the 1940 Expedition. Our personnel is completely made up with the exception of one member. This place could have been easily filled, except for the fact that I wanted another woman member, and frankly that is a ticklish problem on a trip like this to

²² Letter from Mildred Baker to Norm Nevills, December 6, 1939. Folder 5, Box 5, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

be sure to get the right person. --- have had numerous applications, but for various reasons I felt the material was not exactly what was needed.

Based principally upon your obviously sincere letter, it occurs to me that you would be a very welcome addition to our party. You can probably appreciate my concern regarding members, particularly women, as this trip will be the FIRST for women to go clear thru from Wyoming to Boulder Dam. In '38 we embarked at Green River, Utah, whereas this time our point of embarkation is 425 miles above at Green River, Wyoming.²³

Again, Norm asked Baker, as the woman of the expedition, to help Doris (who accompanied the 1940 Expedition to help cook and keep camp) cook (Figure 2.2). His explanation for his request from Baker included language that simultaneously affirmed and contradicted gendered norms of the 1930s. "Will you



Figure 2.2. Lois Jotter eating at camp. (Photo courtesy of Special Collections Department, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah).

²³ Letter from Norm Nevills to Mildred Baker, December 12, 1939. Folder 5, Box 5, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

be agreeable to working with Doris in keeping us fed? [I] Will supply KPs for dishes, etc. [It] will make it much smoother that way. It's impossible to get a regular cook both from the standpoint of efficiency and room. Let me know back on this, please. And for all the men's sakes it's so much nicer to have the women in the kitchen giving the home cooked meal atmosphere!"²⁴

Baker's response hinted only slightly that she hesitated to take on the "womanly" responsibility of cooking for the expedition. She agreed, justifying the task with a sense of duty to the expedition, and the gendered appropriateness of Norm's request:

Strange to say, with all my camping experience, I have not done a great deal of CAMP cooking (but lots of camp eating), as we have usually had a cook along. But as I have to do most of the cooking at home, due to my mother's illness, I believe I could be of considerable help to Doris. As she said some time ago that she was planning the menus, I assume that has already been taken care of, and this to me is one of the worst parts of getting meals. I will be glad to do all I can... I realize that expeditions as well as armies travel on their stomachs, and I sure would hate to be responsible for any difficulties along that line.²⁵

Doris' journals affirm that Mildred performed her duties as camp cook and caretaker with diligence. Doris reflected that Mildred did her share of the labor, that she woke early and helped organize, wash, and cook for the camp without complaint. It is worth mentioning that Mildred Baker's journals of this trip are not a part of the Nevills Collection at the University of Utah. Baker, after the trip was

²⁴ Letter from Norm Nevills to Mildred Baker, March 12, 1940. Folder 5, Box 5, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

²⁵ Letter from Mildred Baker to Norm Nevills, March 21, 1940. Folder 5, Box 5, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

over, ceased correspondence with the Nevillses, and sealed her donated records until her death. Something about the expedition upset Baker so greatly that this relationship did not survive. Perhaps Mildred was more upset about helping Doris with the “feminine” parts of cooking and camping than she originally let on.

However, the accounts Doris and others left regarding Mildred’s participation paint her as a cheerful and hardworking woman, happy to help and to do what was asked of her while on the river.

CHAPTER 3

ADVENTURE, SPORTS, AND LEISURE

Not every trip that Norm organized had scientific aims. In fact, most of the trips Nevills Expedition undertook in the 1930s and 1940s were purely for leisure. Naturally, these sorts of excursions attracted the patronage of wealthier, white Americans seeking an escape from their everyday lives. Norm maintained trips of this nature until 1943, when he had to shut down the trips for the duration of World War II due to restraints on American travel. As the United States focused on the war raging abroad, fewer people found themselves willing or able to spend the money or collect the resources necessary for such treks.

American standards of leisure and recreation underwent sweeping changes in the 1920s. The expansion of commercial culture, mass marketing, and corporate capitalism meant that businesses could sell leisure and recreation to a white, middle-class audience with money to burn. The growth of consumer culture and entertainment only encouraged more Americans to search for personal growth and satisfaction through recreation, sport, and leisure.²⁶ While their working-class counterparts might have engaged in community sports, white,

²⁶Susan Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport* (New York: The Free Press) 1994, 34.

middle-class women did not usually participate in sports. Americans expected women to fulfill their roles as wives, mothers and keepers of the home.²⁷ The women of the Nevills expeditions represent a minority of women with lifetimes' worth of outdoor experience, some of them having participated in alpine and climbing clubs for many years. While the world of organized sport was not readily available to them, outdoor activities like hiking, camping, and rafting had great appeal, for either study or recreation.

Advancements in travel and communication technology made the vast landscapes of the West more accessible to tourists, including women.²⁸ When the automobile brought the attractions of the West even closer to white, affluent Americans interested in recreation and wilderness, women came along for the ride²⁹. The increasingly developed nature of cities and towns highlighted the attraction of secluded Utah rivers, and Nevills, an enterprising businessperson, happily included women on his leisure trips. Many middle-class Americans harbored ideas that wilderness and nature were refuges from hectic and crowded city life, an idea echoed by Norm in a letter to Dr. Chester C. Doherty:

The trip develops one physically in a way calculated to help anyone regardless of age or sex. The regular hours of sleep, finely balanced, menued meals, plus plenty of fine healthy exercise, are all conducive to building one up mentally and physically. And down in these canyons, so far from the rest of the world, this self contained little party offers and wonderfull [sic] chance for some real introspective [sic] research that usually results in a good many problems being worked out and solved that couldn't be reached outside with the fuss and rush of regular living.

²⁷ Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 44.

²⁸ Laura Woodworth-Ney, *Women in the American West* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO) 2008, 194.

²⁹ Woodworth-Ney, *Women in the American West*, 225.

Many of the men and women who went on Nevills' trips wrote to him after they saw an advertisement in a newspaper or an article detailing previous Nevills expeditions. They wanted to get out West to see the terrain and experience the adventures of the unknown rapids. In their letters, these women gave extensive resumes of outdoor experiences to defend and substantiate their ability to undertake these trips. Though their peers and colleagues sometimes criticized a woman's place in these "jaunts," the women Nevills brought down the San Juan or Colorado Rivers did their best to combat any feelings that they did not belong right from the get-go. Nevills had solidified his philosophy regarding the inclusion of women on the river by the time he began drafting his autobiography, probably in the mid-1940s. He took pains to illustrate his thoughts on this matter, and addressed his readers, writing,

For the Colorado River runs my theory is that almost anyone can make the trip – PROVIDING he or she can adapt themselves to being harmonious under any and all conditions. Male or female, over 21 and not over sixty is acceptable. Swimming ability is not needed. Life preservers are worn whenever in hard going – and they can outswim anyone!

Norm's concerns were mostly for his passengers' dispositions and attitudes than they were for their sex or their detailed recreational résumés.

"Tro" and "Bud" Anspach contacted Nevills in 1947, soliciting places on any of Nevills' commercial trips the next summer. Bud's first letter to Nevills included a short description of the pair, eager to travel out West for adventure. In their early 40s, from New Jersey, the Anspaches were in good health and had no young children to look after. Tro worked as a secretary in a dentist's office. Bud filled his time filming color, 3D projections of the couple's travels, which they

would present together to audiences back home. They sought an adventure unlike any they had before undertaken, and they found it through Nevills Expeditions. After they made all the preparations and travel arrangements, the Anspaches accompanied Nevills down the San Juan in July of 1948.

Single women also wrote to Nevills hoping to find a scenic adventure that would get them out of the city for a while. Mary Adamic, a young woman from Cleveland, Ohio, contacted Norm in the fall of 1948. Wanting to soak up every bit of her summer vacation, she explained, “I want to take in as much scenery as possible on a four weeks’ vacation, but on a working girl’s budget.”³⁰ Though Ms. Adamic seems concerned about the cost of the trip, she is obviously still affluent enough to expect to travel in her leisure time, and to spend her extra money and time indulging in outdoor recreation experiences.

Women had begun to include themselves in sport and other competitive physical activity beginning at the turn of the century. Often, women participating in sport posed a fear of “masculinization” to those involved in the sport who worried that women who embraced their athleticism became susceptible to “manly” traits or behaviors. This criticism emerged in discussions of women’s bodies – would they become too muscular and like a man’s? Would participation in competitive athletics inspire women to behave with mannish discord – would they begin spitting and cursing, losing their tempers, and sweating? Conversely, a woman’s presence in a man’s sport became emasculating; if a woman could play a sport or complete a physical feat on par with a man, how much of a

³⁰ Letter from Mary Adamic to Norm Nevills, October 4, 1948. Folder 2, Box 4, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

challenge could it really be? After World War I, physical education classes became mandatory for both sexes. Women's sport was often modified to accommodate for "feminine" sensibilities. Many considered men's sports and the rules guiding that sort of activity too strenuous for women, and threatened their inherent virtue and reproductive capacity. Respectable womanhood (that enjoyed by middle-class, white women) could not accommodate mannish competition and vigorous, sweaty sport in the early twentieth century.³¹

In 1946, Jessie Benedix sought out a summer escape from New York City when she wrote to Nevills. She taught biology in the city, and gave her detailed experiences in the Appalachian Mountain Club as evidence that she possessed the physical fortitude necessary for a trip with Nevills.³² By providing so much background to her outdoor and physical education, Benedix tried to prove her ability by demonstrating her previous experience in male-dominated activities. Nevills invited her welcomingly along for the adventure, writing in reply, "Hello, and welcome to the river-rat fraternity. Only thing is, it SHOULD be a sorority, yet how can I welcome you to a sorority? Since starting women on these river trips, I have certainly brot [sic] forth another problem. Looks like it will have to be the Royal Order of River Rats!"³³

Sylvia Capps wrote to Norm in the winter of 1946 and asked outright, – "The San Juan River boat trip sounds extremely attractive – is it a jaunt women

³¹ Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 7-30.

³² Letter from Jessie Benedix to Norm Nevills, December 4, 1946. Folder 15, Box 5, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

³³ Letter from Norm Nevills to Jessie Benedix, January 8, 1947. Folder 15, Box 5, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

may take?”³⁴ Because 1940s America limited women’s options concerning respectable recreation and sport, Capps expressed doubt about whether Nevills and his Company would allow her to accompany them based strictly on her sex. Of course, Nevills responded positively and Sylvia traveled down the San Juan that summer. After her trip that summer, Capps reflected on her experience. “I hope they put off those old dams for years and years so your way of easing business people’s nerves may continue. No dressing – no glamour to strive for - no flunkys in big suits to contend with – no telephones – street cars or actors or other phases of city existence.”³⁵ Her river experience brought her away from the city and into the desert, where she interacted with wilderness in a way that she found refreshing and relaxing, freed from the pressures of city life. This guiding philosophy drew men and women alike into the wild places of the West and of Utah, creating vital tourism and recreation industries there.

The vast majority of men and women who participated in river trips with Nevills Expedition did so aiming to enjoy their leisure time. Changing ideas about travel, recreation, and affluence allowed middle-class Americans to consider outdoor adventure as a viable way to spend vacations. Women’s participation in these kinds of activities had a long precedent in alpine and climbing clubs that allowed them to participate in social, recreation activities that had once been an exclusive, masculine domain. Nevills was a bit of a pioneer, inviting women to accompany him down rapids and through canyons, seeking thrills and relaxation.

³⁴ Letter from Sylvia Capps to Norm Nevills, February 10, 1946. Folder 4, Box 6, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

³⁵ Letter from Sylvia Capps to Norm Nevills, Fall of 1946. Folder 4, Box 6, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

CHAPTER 4

ART'S INSPIRATION

Many women on these adventures created art from their experiences on the river – they made movies, photos, and paintings or carvings inspired by the vast geography and climate of southern Utah. It is important to note that standard studies of art and art history have only recently made efforts to include the work of women, people of color, and indigenous peoples. At the time these women worked, their art would probably have been largely overlooked in favor of male photographers like Ansel Adams or Eliot Porter. Krista Comer argues in *Updating the Literary West* that, "Western criticism is saddled with male-centered, white-centered and pre-contemporary aesthetic ideals which disable it on questions of gender and race."³⁶ The women aboard Nevills expeditions connected to the aesthetics of the river environment and created some sort of art. Many of them filmed their voyages, took photos, wrote songs, or painted and carved as a response to their river trips.

Correen Mary Spellman of Texas and Mary Ogden Abbot of Massachusetts both patronized Norm's commercial trips. Spellman, who visited

³⁶ Krista Comer, "Feminism, Women Writers and the New Western Regionalism: Revising Critical Paradigms," in *Updating the Literary West* (Fort Worth: The Western Literature Association and Texas Christian University Press), 1997, 19.

Mexican Hat in 1937, painted and sketched her adventures in the Utah desert. She provided Norm with pencil drawings that he used in his brochures and maps for the company.

Abbot travelled with Nevills down the San Juan in the summer of 1948. She returned to Massachusetts and produced a number of carvings, sculptures, and paintings inspired by her trip. A brochure for one of her exhibitions describes her work: "She came to the adventure of riding the rapids of the Colorado, from Bright Angel in the Canyon to Lake Meade (Boulder Dam). The wild world touched her with wonder and left the trace in these paintings and sculpture we present."³⁷ Abbot's trip down the San Juan prompted her to contact Nevills again in January of 1949. "I am beginning to seriously think about the Colorado next summer," she wrote, "I did fairly well with my show and I am wondering if there would not be a lot of material in the Colorado trip."³⁸ Nevills responded enthusiastically regarding this proposal, and encouraged her to make arrangements. This second trip would never come to fruition, however, Abbot listing work conflicts and scheduling problems. Norm and Doris died later that summer, leaving Abbot no opportunity for later trips.

Many of Norm's patrons wrote folk songs and lyrics inspired by their time with Norm and the river. Cheerful lyrics, usually poking fun at the inexperience of Norm's newly-initiated "river rats," were often set to popular tunes that most

³⁷ Brochure of Mary Ogden Abbott art exhibition. Folder 1, Box 4, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

³⁸ Letter from Mary Ogden Abbott to Norm Nevills, January 11, 1949. Folder 1, Box 4, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

people knew, facilitating campfire singing and round-style performances from the boats. One song recounts:

In a cavern, in a canyon
We are all in charge of Nevills,
Though we're on the Colorado,
We are surely Dirty Devils.

We can stop and have our luncheon,
Any bar or cave we please –
But we're sore and come out punchin',
When it's Treet and jam and cheese.

Walking up a narrow canyon
Wading in our shoes and socks,
Why should I pay this much dough to
Scrape my bottom on the rocks.³⁹

Though the song demonstrates that the physical demands of running the river were difficult, it also reflects the kind of good-natured excitement that went along with such a feat. The passengers, unwashed, hungry, tired, and in some amount of physical discomfort, cannot replicate the inspiration and the experience of the river and the canyon in their increasingly urban lives.

I don't mind a rapid, or a shallow bar,
Or rowing hard, or walking far –
But this I mind and I'll say it again,
Is dodging the motion-camera men.⁴⁰

In the song "Outlaw Cave," the lyrics reveal how the novelty of passengers' physical experience on the river seems mismatched with more modern, technological innovations. As some city-dwelling folks floated along with Norm, rowing, and hiking, getting dirty, growing tired and hungry, others followed,

³⁹ Untitled song, possibly by Anne French Kier. Folder 40, Box 29, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers, Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

⁴⁰ Outlaw Cave (song), June 2, 1949. Folder 40, Box 29, Ms 0552, Doris D and Norman Nevills Papers, Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

documenting their trip. They took photos and moving pictures, drew sketches, and wrote songs.

CHAPTER 5

FOR APPEARANCE'S SAKE

Mildred Baker included a photograph of herself in her first letter to Nevills. She wrote of the image, “[I] am enclosing one of my latest snap-shots, showing a tense moment when a baby Parula Warbler was being photographed. It’s a homely enough picture of me so that there will be no delusions on the subject.”⁴¹ Writing to take part on a scientific voyage through desolate geography and rugged rivers, Baker still made note of her simple physical features. Her letter included an entire page listing various expeditions, camping trips, rock climbing adventures, hiking, backpacking, and mountaineering. Even with a background demonstrating plainly that she had made a lifetime of participating in outdoor activities, Baker adhered to gendered expectations regarding her appearance. Not finding herself fantastically attractive, she made sure to point out this “inadequacy” in her introductory letter to a perfect stranger. Perhaps by pointing out that she did not conform to conventional standards of beauty, Baker tried to make herself seem less threatening, more like the rest of the (male) party. By eliminating herself as a sexual threat, perhaps she hoped to emphasize the skills that would make her a valuable asset to the Expedition as a scientist. Other

⁴¹ Letter from Mildred Baker to Norm Nevills, December 6, 1939. Folder 5, Box 5, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

societal conditioning might be to blame for Baker's commentary on her appearance. American society places great emphasis on a woman's appearance, her beauty as defined by male spectators, and her "feminine" capability to be humble and restrained when discussing her appearance.

In Figure 5.1, Elzada Clover is shown on the 1938 expedition in a picture that exemplifies the ways in which Clover minimized any emphasis that anyone on the trip might have placed on her appearance. She is smiling, but looks calm and collected, her hand in her pocket. Her pose is not active or aggressive. She wears practical clothing and garb for her work – long-pant overalls, a sunhat, glasses. In many ways, Elzada appears almost masculine. Her short hair tucked up into her hat, her loosely-worn clothing and lack of make-up all conceal or



Figure 5.1. Elzada Clover, 1938. (Photo courtesy of Special Collections Department, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah).

detract from any real socially gendered identifiers at all. She appears almost asexual, able to focus her attention on her work and eliminate any sexual attention that might have detracted from that aim.

Many other women wrote to Nevills concerning their appearance at one time or another. In fact, almost every woman who wrote to Nevills before or after her river trip commented on the way she looked in photos or on film. Dr. Clover, who sent photos of herself and Lois Jotter to Nevills before the 1938 expedition, commented, "I am sending by airmail photographs of all of us together and separate pictures of each. In the group picture I look like a horse thief or a prissy school teacher. I can't decide which."⁴² The exaggerated importance of women's appearances remained present even as they prepared to embark upon scientific voyages. Clover provides Nevills with two choices for interpreting her photo – either as a morally deprived "horse thief," or a prim and proper "prissy school teacher." Both options refer to her moral character, removing any attention from whatever conclusions one might draw from her appearance as a sexual prospect or sexual distraction to the men. Clover's journals refer again to her apparent discomfort in being glared at, presumably because her presence on the 1938 expedition was particularly remarkable due to her sex. "We particularly Lois and I kept pretty close to the hotel because people stared at us."⁴³ In the case of both Dr. Clover and Ms. Baker, it would not have been respectable for either woman to discuss her physical beauty in a way that was complimentary. White, middle-

⁴² Letter from Elzada Clover to Norm Nevills, February 1938. Folder 23, Box 6, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

⁴³ Elzada Clover's journal, Folder 2, Box 29, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

class propriety dictated that women should be modest and demure, quiet assistants to whatever aims their male counterparts deemed important and acceptable. For them to request positions on Nevills' scientific team was already breaching boundaries of standard feminine behavior. To mitigate the potential for criticism from within the Expedition or from other observers, the women adhered strictly to these standards to make their other trespasses seem less extreme.

In many ways, standards of sexuality and appearance posed a threat to the successful scientific careers of women like Mildred Baker and Dr. Elzada Clover. Modern scholarship impresses upon its students that a woman's scientific and intellectual capabilities and her appearance or domestic accomplishments can be mutually exclusive. For the women of the 1930s and 1940s who found themselves testing gendered standards, it made sense to simultaneously reinforce these seemingly disparate ideas. In agreeing to cook, and in constantly stressing the importance of their appearance, the women retained traditional sexual norms even as they sought to violate the boundaries of acceptable behavior for women. They participated in the masculine physical world while maintaining their white, middle-class status as respectable women.

In the early twentieth century, cosmetics and other commercial indicators of beauty became more popular. While makeup had once been the exclusive province of women of ill repute, by the 1930s, middle-class, white, American women had embraced standards of beauty only achieved with the aid of cosmetics.⁴⁴ Feminine respectability demanded that women carefully attended to

⁴⁴ Kathy Peiss, "Making Faces: The Cosmetics Industry and the Cultural Construction of Gender, 1890-1930" in *Genders*, Spring 1990.

their hair and ensured that their clothing remained clean, pressed, and situation-appropriate. The same standard incorporated feminine ideals of thin bodies, red lips, and neatly waved coifs. Doris, before beginning the 1940 Grand Canyon expedition, took time in town to have her hair washed and waved.⁴⁵ She knew that it would be a long while before she had the opportunity again, and she wanted to maintain an appearance of “respectability” for as long as possible. Doris took time during the expedition to maintain her “civilized” appearance, as well. She wrote in her journal of the trip about “waving” her own hair, and helping Mildred do the same. It is hard to imagine these two women, tasked with feeding the expedition and, in Mildred’s case, collecting scientific data, taking the time out of a physically grueling schedule and in the middle of a demanding climate like the Colorado River, to carefully wash and set their hair into attractive waves. Most of Doris’ journal reflects that she ended each day in exhaustion, finding sleep before most of the other travelers (in part, so that she could be awake first in order to start over the constant cycle of food preparation), yet she maintained a strict routine about hygiene, and made sure to retain some semblance of a beauty regimen. Perhaps part of Doris’ motivation to maintain these standards of beauty while on the river had something to do with Norm. Stories about Nevills reveal that he preferred to take “the pretty girls” in his boats, leaving the other women in vessels piloted by the boatmen Norm employed. As photography and other documentation of Norm’s river trips became more common, perhaps he wanted to surround himself with the most attractive women in order to better

⁴⁵ “Woman Conquerer of the Colorado,” published in *The Daily Sentinel*, Grand Junction, Colorado, June 15-July 6, 1941, Folder 9, Box 28, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

advertise his business.⁴⁶

Despite Norm's progressive interpretation of gender roles, he clearly appreciated the proximity of beautiful women, and consciously ensured that his boat would be properly stocked with this commodity. Despite constantly proclaiming that women needed only to smilingly endure the hardships of river life, Norm seemed preoccupied with the "prettiness" of that smile. If we take this perspective, the most beautiful women on the trip were in rare supply and Norm asserted his dominance over the other men on the trip by monopolizing this resource. Norm purported to care only about his passengers' ability to persevere in the face of strange and extreme environmental challenges, regardless of gender. However, other sources shed light on the importance that he placed on sexual desirability. To consistently place the women that he found most attractive in his immediate presence *and control* is to highlight the primacy of appearance in Norm's eyes.

White, middle-class women were expected to maintain these appearances at all times. Baker, before her trip, wrote to Nevills about her travel attire, "Wish it would not be necessary to bother with 'store clothes' but after all, I would create a sensation if I wore my levis on the train (although it would not be the first time I have done such things, but only for short trips.)"⁴⁷ While Baker had limited space for personal items, she could not travel in the same garments she would require while working on the river. Baker accepted the social standard that meant she

⁴⁶ Conversations with Roy Webb, author and archivist at Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

⁴⁷ Letter from Mildred Baker to Norm Nevills, March 20, 1940. Folder 5, Box 5, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

needed to dress more formally for travel, even if such an adjustment was inconvenient and contrary to her aims as a scientist and outdoorswoman.

Other women reinforced this emphasis on appearance as they forayed into “masculine” endeavors. The All-American Girls Baseball League, while promoting the athletic abilities of its players, simultaneously reminded spectators that those women not only possessed great athletic skill; they remained attractive and feminine as well. In the 1940s, women from across the United States joined professional baseball and softball teams to entertain the country with their athleticism while the men fought in the war abroad. However, the men who marketed the AAGBL to the public placed great emphasis on the respectable femininity of the players. They were “nice girls,” who played ball in short skirts and makeup in order to attract an audience with their sexuality. Players went to charm school after their preseason conditioning, they kept their hair long, wore makeup and nail polish, and were forbidden from appearing in public in pants or jeans.⁴⁸ Baker and the other women who expressed concern about their appearance before and during their trips down the river displayed the same kind of disconnect between feminine appearance and masculine physicality. The women baseball players had to place greater emphasis on their femininity and social respectability than other women not in the spotlight. As soon as a woman pushed against boundaries of masculine physicality, her gendered identity became suspect. Anne Rosner, a woman who patronized Nevills Expedition in 1940, began writing to Norm in the months before her planned trip in order to gain a clearer understanding of what she should expect on her voyage. However,

⁴⁸ Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, 140-163

in the process of inquiring of Norm if they would be able to find a source of clean drinking water on the river, Ms. Rosner reveals that her friends were concerned that going down the river with Norm would begin altering her physical appearance, making her body display vestiges of masculine ruggedness:

Do you have some secret formula whereby we will have some fairly decent drinking water? The river looked quite dirty. Vi also saw this picture and is wondering how I will ever manage to keep from growing a beard. She also wondered if I would have to be as dirty as he was at the end of the trip. ... You have no idea of the ribbing I am getting. Could she be jealous?⁴⁹

Seldom did any of the letters of the Nevills women reflect stress or concern for their lack of ability. Almost the opposite seems to be true. The women wrote of their confidence and excitement about their trips before they embark. Mildred Baker, in the spring of 1938, wrote,

So far I have not been afraid about the trip, but I won't promise I am not going to get scared! For I think no one ever knows just how he will react in an emergency. I have been so busy planning on getting away that I guess I have not thought a great deal about the rapids, etc., but I am re-reading some of the books as I get a minute of time, so that I will not forget what we will be up against. I think it is going to be a glorious adventure.⁵⁰

Even though the trip posed a physical danger to everyone involved, and Baker would be only one of two women on the trip, these things did not seem to concern her. Instead, the prospect of adventure and challenge excited her and she wanted to meet it.

Other patron's letters mirror this sentiment, and before she left for the

⁴⁹ Letter from Mildred Baker to Norm Nevills, May 20, 1940. Folder 5, Box 5, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

⁵⁰ Letter from Mildred Baker to Norm Nevills, May 20, 1940. Folder 5, Box 5, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

Colorado in 1940, Anne Rosner wrote to Norm about her preparations, and that she remained committed to the expedition and retained full faith in his abilities. "The other night I saw a Movie short on "Buzz" Holmstrom's trip on the Colorado. I had goose-flesh most of the time but still am looking to the real experience. The river looked plenty tough. However, I have complete confidence in you so any time you say the word I will be Johnny on the spot."⁵¹

Only Baker described any sense of unease about her male-dominated expedition in terms of uneven representation of the sexes. In a letter to Doris, she wrote, "Yes, I get the same kind of silly remarks from a few of my friends, although most of them seem to be too sensible to dwell on the 'fun we will have with all those men.' I can well imagine we will be much too busy to do any 'flirting'!!!! even if we were so inclined."⁵² Baker remained focused on her work, and disregarded any attempts to distract her attention to the prospect of sex or flirting. While all other references to sexuality (male or female) in regards to the trip were less direct and rely heavily on implication and suggestion, Baker concretely informed Doris (not Norm) that her intentions for the voyage were strictly academic. Again, Baker eliminated herself from consideration as a sexual threat, or even a sexualized person by pointing out her focused interest on her work and the scientific aims of the Expedition.

⁵¹ Letter from Anne Rosner to Norm Nevills, November 2, 1939. Folder 17, Box 18, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers, Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

⁵² Letter from Mildred Baker to Norm Nevills, May 28, 1940. Folder 5, Box 5, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

CHAPTER 6

AFTER THE RIVER

Some of the women from the Nevills trips continued to correspond with Norm and Doris after their voyages. Those women who continued to write to Nevills expressed their thrill and sense of accomplishment at their experience. Tro Anspach (Figure 6.1) left perhaps the most vivid recounting of her feelings about what she has experienced,

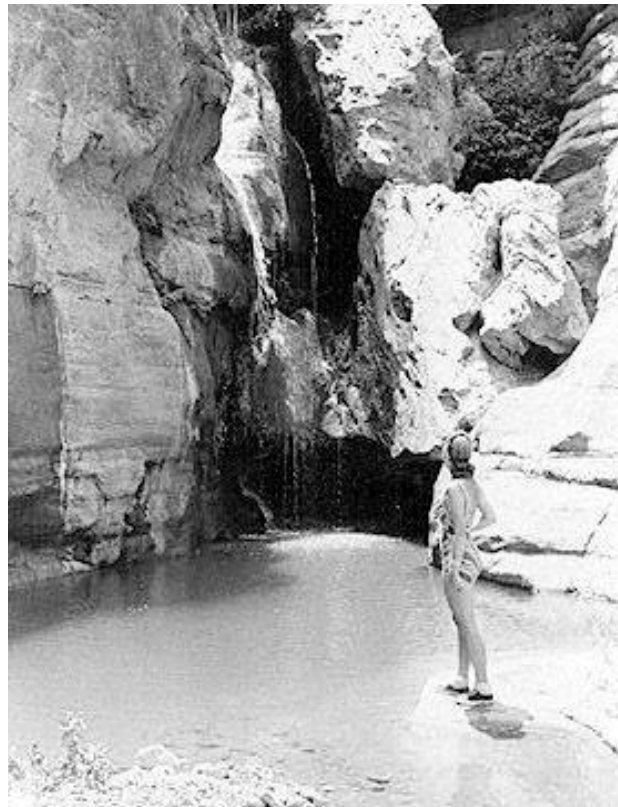


Figure 6.1. Tro Anspach at Arch Creek, 1949. (Photo courtesy of Northern Arizona University, Cline Library, Colorado Plateau Archives.).

I've grown – I'm Tro Anspach – I've been with Norm down the river! Not that I think I did the trip with much rugged fortitude. My inability to swim and my fear of climbing practically black-balls me from your list of eligible "river rats," but for a "bedroom gal," I will say this in self-defense, I at least wanted to do these things.

Tro went on to discuss how her return from Nevills and the river left her with a sense of melancholy. She cannot sing for Doris as she normally would because she feels sad. Tro offered us a colorful reaction to her time on the river. Her adventures with Nevills left her feeling capable and fit, inspired and passionate. Her trip had changed her so that she seemed to have trouble adjusting back to her life on land. The car seats are lumpy, the toilets are indoors and without a good view of the landscape, the food does not have the same river seasoning she enjoyed so much. Tro felt excited about the opportunities afforded her on the river; they obviously presented her with new and exciting things, things she had not experienced often in her life as a respectable, middle-class white woman living in New Jersey.

She reflects on life back on land,

Then, too the food lacked old George's generous seasoning. The car – had had huge lumps in it like I never found in Nevills' hot-air folding beds, and there was a darned old man-made potty that no matter which hole I sat on I couldn't see the San Juan River! ... the Arches, too, were so puny compared to Rainbow that I sighed with impatience. See what you've done, man, with your extravagance? ... And the four-star close-up Bud took in color with his big camera! There you stand – a man in a million – a man of brawn, muscles of steel, handsome, full of life, vital, vibrant, full of the joy of living, full of desire – with your eyes closed! When I saw that I was so mad I could have climbed up Rainbow Bridge with a case of beer on my hip!⁵³

⁵³ Letter from Tro Anspach to Norm Nevills, July 29, 1948. Folder 16, Box 4, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

Tro expresses how the river brought up feelings classically associated with masculinity; she would not be pushed around, she was Tro, she had conquered the river and the West and she could do anything. She left feeling empowered, brave and capable. At the same time, her description of Norm closely follows the Western hero archetype: Norm is muscular, defiant, and individualistic. Tro's background as an artist perhaps encouraged her to romanticize Norm's masculinity, dramatizing his role as a rugged adventurer. Her triumphant self-reflection mirrors the heroic Western male characteristics that Tro finds most inspiring. Despite her infatuation with specifically masculine traits, Tro worked hard at maintaining her feminine appearance, paralleling the experience of the rest of female "river-rats."

Overall, the women reflected on their appearance in photos taken along the river (Figure 6.2). This feature tends to be extremely important in evaluating



Figure 6.2. Rosalind Johnson, Sue Seeley, Dock Marston's daughter, and Mary Abbott, 1952. (Photo courtesy of Northern Arizona University, Cline Library, Colorado Plateau Archives. NAU.PH.99.3.1.4.43, #46993)

the experience. Mary Ogden Abbot wrote about a photo taken of her on the river, "The picture looks less like someone who has just emerged from 10 days in the bottom of the Grand Canyon than anything I ever saw! And as a very unkind friend remarked, 'Looks at least 10 years younger than you do!!'"⁵⁴ Obviously, Abbot found her time on the river invigorating and vitalizing. Her friend interpreted Abbot's appearance to mean that the river inspired in her a sense of youth, innocence, energy, and lightheartedness. Abbot gives us a rare glimpse into other ways in which women maintained their gendered roles while on their treks when she wrote to Doris about having left a dressing gown behind in Mexican Hat when she went home. Abbot described the garment with almost sheepish timidity. "I wrote your wife... saying I had forgotten my dressing gown... which is dark red silk with little white flowers on it. I am mortified to have forgotten it."⁵⁵ Even though Abbot had limited space for personal clothing and other belongings, and even though she was entering a world of deserts, rapids, and outdoor living, she still found it necessary to bring along a most feminine garment designed to maintain her modesty while changing clothes. Abbot wrote to Doris before she wrote to Norm, and only after she received no reply from his wife did she seek out his assistance in her debacle. Discussing the appearance and even the presence of Abbot's dressing gown with Norm alluded to the idea that at some point, Abbot might have appeared in her cabin at Mexican Hat without her clothes. Pointing this out in mixed company was not polite or expected, thereby

⁵⁴ Letter from Mary Ogden Abbott to Norm Nevills, August 20, 1949. Folder 1, Box 4, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

⁵⁵ Letter from Mary Ogden Abbott to Norm Nevills, July 6, 1948. Folder 1, Box 4, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

explaining Abbot's mortification.

Tro and Bud Anspach returned to New Jersey with film from their trip and vivid memories in their heads. Bud turned the color film into 3D projections, a technology that he spent many subsequent years perfecting. Tro wrote songs and skits to accompany the projections, and the pair travelled around the country presenting their films, music, and theater. Katie Lee, a river runner and environmentalist, later recorded many of the songs Tro wrote, folding them tightly into the thriving folk music movement associated with the rivers and deserts of Utah and Arizona. Lee's songs became a bastion of resistance during the 1950s and 1960s when the Bureau of Reclamation threatened Utah's river systems with dams and reservoirs. Right after her first trip with Norm, Tro wrote him a letter that describes her feelings of accomplishment and excitement,

You betcha I'll run Dubendorff with you! I'll run the whole works if you say, "Come on, Tro." The only thing that has me in a tizzy is climbing cliffs to get around them on foot. If that happens to me your[sic] going to find a stow-a-way for THAT is the only thing that disturbs my peace of mind. Ain't that nuts? As I have said before, I guess I'm not afraid of getting killed, I'm afraid of getting HURT. But don't worry, I'm not a "party pooper." I'll do whatever I have to – only I surely WOULD love to run the big ones. I have NEVER seen anything as exciting as that picture. That mad, mad water! Isn't it wonderful? ⁵⁶

Tro carried this sense of wonder with her years after she went down the river with Norm. The experience informed her life's work, and influenced her association with the later politicization of the rivers of the West. In some ways, Tro's

⁵⁶ Letter from Tro Anspach to Norm Nevills, April 4, 1949. Folder 16, Box 4, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

experience is representative of the many women who went river running with Nevills, in that her trip became a major turning point in her life; it informed her future actions and restructured her interpretation of American standards of gender.

CHAPTER 7

NORM, MASCULINITY, AND THE GENDERED STRUCTURE OF POWER

As much as the women who ended up in Norm's company for river expeditions and adventure travel acted out and transgressed gendered expectations set for them, Norm was also a product of his intersecting environments. He was not separate in any way from the World War II-era United States; he could not be unaffected by contemporary standards of gender which acted on women as well as men. In many ways, Norm is a true and golden example of what a 20th-century white man was supposed to be. These expectations – and Norm's failings or successes – are closely detailed in Norm's journals of his trips, as well as passenger's letters and journals.

The expectations that Norm held for the people around him reflect both his position in society and the ways in which he forcibly maintained the positions of those surrounding him. He followed the traditional hierarchical patterns dictated by society at large, and while he challenged those traditions in specific ways, he was careful to maintain his own position by reinforcing certain aspects of femininity. Asking Dr. Clover, an accomplished botanist, to cook and supervise food for his entire expedition is a perfect example of this dichotomy. On the one hand, Norm views a women breaking into a traditionally male field and is excited

to bring her along on a potentially dangerous trip. On the other hand, he assumes that she not only can cook, but that she has the skill to feed a large group over the course of several weeks with only portable camp cooking tools. Women, then, are not the timid, kitchen-bound housewives that society deemed them to be, because they could persist through a challenging river trip, so long as they brought some of those kitchen skills along with them. In contrast to this odd duality of identity, Norm positioned himself as a rugged adventurer who embodied masculinity and encouraged his passengers to view him through that lens.

The success of Nevills Expedition relied on Norm's ability to convince people that he was a capable boatman who could take his passengers into remote and desolate wild places and still bring them back in one piece. Norm's business balanced carefully on the line between dangerous-exciting and dangerous-deadly. The wildness of the geography, and Norm's masculine vigor, the rowing, smoking, ruggedly muscular, and suntanned man who offered to guide those with lesser skills down the river for a fee all combined to create the kind of masculinity that Teddy Roosevelt tried to demand from 20th-century men and boys. It is clear that Norm considered himself a leader of men and of women, and it is also clear that Norm was intolerant of any deviation from the cut-and-dried thinking that he was the authority to which everyone else was meant to be subservient.

In close readings of the materials in the Nevills Collection, it becomes evident that Norm's primary motivation for almost every performance of

masculinity, every decision regarding appropriate river behavior for men and for women, and the demands he placed on the behaviors of others in his company, served to reinforce a hierarchical power structure at which Norm was always the head. Reading Norm as an individual concerned with enforcing and soliciting participation in a struggle for power perhaps explains how Norm was so comfortable encouraging and inviting women on his river expeditions when no one else would allow them. Women on the river were not a threat to Norm's authority; they relied on his ability to ferry them safely through the canyons and over the rivers. These women came to Norm already at a bit of a disadvantage – they represented rarities in their scientific or academic fields, or they had chosen to participate in the kind of river adventure that they recognized as being male-centric, which is why they so often inquired about whether women could come, or why they approached Norm with overwhelming lists of their recreational accomplishments as a way to “convince” him of their capabilities. Norm really needed little convincing. He had accepted the presence and participation of women on the river, and, as a man concerned with “firsts” and his reputation as a safe and capable boatman, used those women to his advantage, while still allowing them a novel experience under his care.

One of the most notable differences between Norm's interpretation of wilderness masculinity and Roosevelt's is that Norm happily included women into the same standards of toughness and noncomplaining compliance with his orders as he demanded from his male associates. Perhaps the best example of this kind of standard Norm set occurred on the 1938 Expedition. This was an

extremely difficult excursion, and Norm struggled for the duration to bond with most of his company or to earn their unquestioning fealty, which he tried mightily first to earn, and then to cajole from them.⁵⁷ The outlier in this case was Dr. Elzada Clover, who seemingly proved her value to Norm as a person willing to work harder than she should, without complaint, and who could continue those practices in the face of intense fear and physical strain. Norm's records of that expedition, and any notes that later referred to Dr. Clover in any fashion, are full of praise for her. Norm's primary requirement for those he considered "true river rats" was that they were able to work through their fear and their discomfort without grouching. According to Norm's logic, if he could manage to continue trekking even though *he* felt afraid or sick or tired or was in pain, then anyone else could do the same, regardless of sex or ability.

Well, I still think that anyone that quits a party because he's afraid is a damn yellow cur to begin with. Shouldn't start out on a water trip if he or she can't take it. Sure we get afraid. I do, my swimming is an utter joke, but I don't permit that to affect me one way or the other in deciding on running a rapid, or running trips. Powell's men were just plain quitters. Eddy's too. Don Harris was afraid, and quit. I have no use or respect for them. -----Ed Olsen was scared, Elzada Clover, Margaret⁵⁸, but they were right on the job and no whimpering.⁵⁹

Though this is not a very sound interpretation regarding how individuals deal with toil and strain, for Norm it was as good as gospel and says much about how he constructed and enforced his masculinity. Good "men" and good river rats, according to Norm, were those who could be most like him.

⁵⁷ Staveley, Gaylord, "Norman Nevills" in *Grand Canyon River Guides Boatman's Quarterly*, Spring, 2004.

⁵⁸ Margaret, here, is probably Margaret Marston, the letter recipient's daughter.

⁵⁹ Letter from Norm Nevills to Otis Marston, March 9th, 1948. Folder 7, Box 16, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

Though these yardsticks of river-rat-worthiness were applied quite evenly to the sexes, Norm held on to certain parts of gendered stereotypes that reinforced or mirrored the power hierarchy of the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. Norm's boatmen or other men whom he designated were the only people allowed to row through rapids, assuming Norm did not run all the boats himself. He did allow women to row for short periods in still water, but never through white water. Norm expected the men to perform the heavier labor and the hardest rowing.

Cutler has been so unruly about keeping place on the river, etc. that am going to let him row the Joan. Cutler is a damn sissy, and tries to say the Joan is easier to row than the MHII and he can't keep up. When we leave after lunch it takes less than an hour for Cutler to show a yellow streak and lay down on the rowing.

If the men in his company failed at this task, he regarded them with derision. Norm's journal entries from the beginning of the 1938 expedition provide some rather fascinating insights into Norm's regard for his company, complete with explicit references to gender and sexuality:

Mile 202 $\frac{3}{4}$

The women are standing up beautifully so far

June 26

We haven't enough man power for this trip. The women are doing more heavy work than they should, especially Elzada.

June 28

We took turns having nightmares, etc. Lois was sick in the night to her apparent shame. To date Elzada and I are the only ones left that aren't sick. They all think it's the water. I really think it's the nervous strain, heat, and hard work.

At this point in the expedition, the dirty river water the company were drinking probably did contribute to their feeling ill. It is interesting to note that even this early on, Norm had established that he identified with Elzada. He seemed to view the rest of the company as in some sort of opposition or a lesser designation than he and Elzada, who either genuinely managed not to become sick, or who were simply better at hiding it.

July 4

Sat around the lantern until after 10:00 PM. Elzada made fudge, with KLIM, sugar, and chocolate. Gene has infection in his leg, which he seems to foster, but so far doesn't look bad. Except for Elzada the rest act like a bunch of kids, whispering amongst themselves and trying to work up a good excuse to quit at Lees Ferry.

July 6

6:00 PM and another big feed, mostly of bisquits. Gene and Lois spent the time sleeping. Lois seems to tire easily and always wants to sleep. Anemic, probably, tho she looks big and husky. Lois has been mighty rude and short with Elzada. I would never want to take Lois on another trip. Would like to drop her off at Lees Ferry.

July 7

12:50 PM Mile 49. Right bank. Lunch. A distinctly unfriendly attitude prevails against Elzada and myself. I'm disgusted with the whole outfit. I think Elzada is the best man in the bunch.⁶⁰

Note that Norm still expected Elzada to cook, though he clearly held her in higher esteem than any of the others. Norm's commentary here about Lois is particularly intriguing. He was not at all concerned with Lois' health, though if she was indeed suffering from anemia, others might have considered that a

⁶⁰ Norm's journal, 1938, p. 8-15, Folder 3, Box 28, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

legitimate health concern which contributed to her apparent exhaustion and illness. Norm wrote off that concern, though, by remarking on Lois' appearance. She looked "husky," which one might take to be a snide remark about her size, which of course has nothing at all to do with anemia or exhaustion. Norm was also clearly frustrated by Lois' behavior toward Elzada, which seemed to provoke in him a sort of protective or defensive attitude. It is also noteworthy that Norm referred to Elzada as the best *man* in the bunch. This was clearly a disparaging commentary about the manliness of the actual men in the company, but was also perhaps the highest praise Norm could fathom for Elzada. She had met his demands regarding river behavior; she had been tested and found worthy of that fraternity. Clearly, Norm did not mean to imply that Elzada was mannish or masculine. Instead, he uses "the best man" to describe her ability and her attitude, which tells us more about Norm's understanding of masculinity and power than it does about Elzada.

Norm's reliance on this power structure and his continual benefit from it explains other peculiarities of his river behavior. In the biographical notes Joan Staveley⁶¹ took about Norm, it becomes clear that Norm wielded significant influence and control over his excursions, separate from simply guiding them down the river. The subtle ways in which he reinforced his power over these groups illustrate that Norm used masculine and feminine stereotypes to manage that power for himself, but also to subvert gendered norms in his favor. For instance, on recreational trips, Norm "got the good looking women if any," in his

⁶¹ Nee Nevills, Norm's daughter. Unlabeled spiral notebook #41, Folder 9, Box 1, Ms 0552, Doris D. and Norman Nevills Papers. Manuscripts, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

own boat, leaving the “other” women for his subordinate boatmen. He demanded a “blind following” from those boatmen, and seldom explained his decisions or his methods to them. Norm “encouraged races” amongst the other boats, but “if any boat passed N[orm], he was up in arms.” Taken together, these anecdotes paint a picture of a man who could guarantee his position at the top of his imposed power structure by forcing his subordinates to compete for resources and by keeping them always guessing at his next move.

In many ways, it makes sense that Norm’s loyalties to the structure of power on the river would have been stronger than to traditional gender roles. On the river, when he spent so much time with the same small and intimate group of people, the dynamics of power and obedience superseded the demands of the outside world. In the contained system of the boats and the river, the structure of power and authority became what mattered. It might have been easier for Norm to discard his other considerations of gender in favor of complete control. Elzada, in particular, took advantage of Norm’s relaxed gendered standards and proved useful to Norm by submitting entirely to his authority. By doing this, Norm bestowed Elzada with special concern, he “initiated” her into “his fraternity” of river rats, and he praised her name for the rest of his life.

CHAPTER 8

THE END OF AN ERA

On September 19, 1949, Doris and Norm took off from Mexican Hat in their small airplane to the nearest town to take Doris to Grand Junction, Colorado. The engine of the Piper J3 encountered problems right from takeoff. Turning the plane around, Norm went to land on the runway from which he had come. Some theories speculate that the Nevills' younger daughter, Sandra, was standing on the runway, still waving her parents off on their journey. Whatever the reason, Doris and Norm were not able to land the plane safely. They crashed into a rim of rock in the cliffs above Mexican Hat, which killed them both.

Mary Ogden Abbot designed the plaque (Figure 8.1) that now marks the



Figure 8.1. Nevills Memorial Plaque Dedication: unidentified man, Frank (Fisheyes) Masland, Mary Abbott, and Barry Goldwater, July 1952. (Photo courtesy of Northern Arizona University, Cline Library Special Collections, Colorado Plateau Archives.).

site of the Nevills' premature death. Friends and family of the Nevills dedicated the plaque in 1950. Scrawled across the top are the words, "They run the rivers of eternity."

The women who went with Nevills down the San Juan and Colorado Rivers both reinforced and stepped outside the gendered bounds of the 1930s and 40s. World War II framed the experiences of women seeking life outside the domestic sphere. War work allowed many women to feel empowered by their abilities to labor and to operate within traditionally masculine spheres. As these spheres opened to women, so did other possibilities and other activities that had once been completely restrictive to women's participation.

Alpine and climbing clubs had a long history of inviting women's participation in outdoor recreation. In this same vein, many of the women who contacted Norm about his river trips had experience hiking, climbing, and camping. Norm's happy inclusion of women into the fold of Nevills Expeditions was not without its own loyalty to certain gendered expectations, however. While Norm was a kind of pioneer allowing women to participate in the first place, he retained ideas that encouraged women passengers to do the cooking and the washing on their trips because Norm thought it was nice for the men to have a woman in the "kitchen."

The world of sports was slowly opening to women, and female athletes slowly became incorporated into the world of respectability. While American society at the time emphasized the importance of their looks, the women of the Nevills trips also fretted over their appearance and tried to maintain a sense of

femininity in their appearances and behavior while on their trips. They agreed to cook for Nevills and male crewmembers, a bastion of domestic femininity, while on scientific expeditions dominated by masculine expectations of physicality and academe.

The United States underwent changes in the 1930s and 1940s to expectations of feminine recreation and beauty. It saw increased availability of recreation and outdoor leisure. Women, even in the middle of a desolate canyon, living out of boats and without any modern conveniences, still took time to maintain cultural standards of appearance. They waved their hair after bathing in the river. They brought dressing gowns and travel clothes with them on their voyages, even though they had limited space to do so. On the scientific expeditions, they maintained clean, simple appearances in order to eliminate themselves as sexual viabilities to the men along in the boats. While they trespassed other gendered standards of behavior, some women maintained their appearance, hygiene, and “attractiveness” on the river as symbols of their respectability as white, middle-class women.

The women of the Nevills Expeditions sought the same sorts of experiences that men did. The 1938 and 1940 scientific expeditions both included the professional participation of women. Though they encountered some opposition from their families and fellow faculty members, with Norm’s help, these women found a place in the “sorority of river rats.” Women on the river chased inspiration for their art. Their songs, photos, and drawings portray the exuberance and challenge of river running, and demonstrate how inspiring

the deserts and canyons of the west could be.

What these women found along the rivers of southern Utah was a sense of empowerment and joy. They examined their experiences as women of the 20th century. Nevills Expeditions offered them opportunities to participate in outdoor activities that demanded a great deal of physical effort. The river changed their expectations of their busy lives; it offered them a quiet place for reflection and an exhilarating challenge that they felt moved to rise up and meet.

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